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## Black History Month 2020

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## Black History Month 2020

Michael J. Pryse<sup>1</sup>

**I**n Paul's epistles, one of the themes that is worked over and over again is that of incorporation into the Body of Christ. People who are in the isolation of separateness and aloneness are called into the life of a new community. The dead are called out from the isolation of whatever cave it is that has imprisoned them and called to stand and live within a re-ordered community whose disciples are called to live as a "salt and light" community of faith whose relationships have been made right and made new by God's grace.

Paul describes that reality in his letter to the Galatians by saying that for those who are clothed in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. It's a beautiful picture! But in life, we know that those distinctions most certainly exist! We know that in the church of Galatia they most certainly existed. Why else would Paul have written this, if there were not struggles related to the status of Jew, Greek, slave, free, male and female?

Likewise, those distinctions most certainly exist within our church. Not literally Jew and Greek. But most certainly the "in" and the "not so in." Perhaps not slave and free. But certainly those with power and those without power. And who would deny that there are distinctions between black, brown, yellow, red and white; male and female, gay and straight, rich or poor, indigenous and non-indigenous! Those distinctions most certainly exist and testify to the measure to which we fall short of the standard of what Paul says it means to be clothed with Christ. Our seating plans are not aligned to those of the kingdom.

Prior to attending seminary, I studied history at Wilfrid Laurier University. I had become a lover of history and what history could teach us at a young age. It became a passion in grades seven and eight and that passion has never really left me. One of the most enlightening courses I took during my undergrad training was an introduction to African American history. Our primary textbook was, "From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans," published in 1947 and revised several times thereafter. It remains a classic. Its author was John Hope Franklin, who was born in 1915 and raised in segregated Oklahoma. Graduating from Fisk University in 1935, he earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1941. Over the course of his career, he held faculty posts at a number of institutions, including Howard University and the University of Chicago, before being appointed in 1983 the James B. Duke Professor of History at Duke University.

In an address commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Franklin's birth, Harvard president and historian Drew Faust remarked that "Franklin insisted not just upon the relevance of history, but indeed its pre-eminence as the indispensable instrument of change and even salvation from legacies that left unexamined will destroy us. 'Good history,' Franklin remarked in 2003, 'is a good foundation for a better present and future.'"

"For John Hope Franklin, history was a calling and a weapon, a passion and a project," Faust said. "Fundamental to the task at hand would be to revise the 'hallowed' falsehoods, to illustrate how the abuse and misuse of history served to legitimate systems of oppression not just in the past but in the present as well."

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Even the election of Barack Obama as America's first African-American president during the last months of Franklin's life was insufficient, in his view, to exorcise the remnants of racism. "He dared hope that the nation had 'turned a significant corner.' But he knew that erasing the color line required far more than electing a black president. Until we had a new history, we could not build a different and better future," Faust said. "In other words, it is history that has the capacity to save us."

Well, here's a distressing historical fact. And acknowledging this fact may, indeed, have the capacity to save us! The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the whitest denomination in the United States. The 2014 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study found that 96% of the denomination's members were white, 2% black and 2% mixed race or Latino. We don't have similar demographic data for Canadian religious groups, but I suspect that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada would show similar numbers. This should be a matter of significant concern. Increasingly, over time, our demographic profile is becoming less and less representative of the general population as a whole.

Here's another fact. Jesus was a poor, often homeless, brown-skinned, one time refugee; an indigenous man who lived under colonial occupation. Truthfully, there is not much about that profile that is typically represented in the composition of our worshipping assemblies. Why is that? Is it merely the result of a few accidents of history and dominant immigration patterns? That's certainly part of it. But that's not all of it, not by a long shot.

At our 2018 Synod Assembly, we stated a commitment to "the vital and urgent work of confronting the sin of racism and to the dismantling of racist and colonial attitudes present in ourselves, our church, and our society." We further committed ourselves to:

1. in-depth self-reflection and learning with respect to the issues of racism, privilege, diversity, and right relationships,
2. individual and corporate confession of racism as a structural sin which exists in our churches and communities,
3. after the process of confession, repentance, self-learning, and reflection to humbly respond to invitations from communities that experience the debilitating effects of racism and with communities that live with privilege, to find ways to journey together, confronting the reality of racism.

To help us in this work we have created a Racial Justice Advisory Committee to lead our Synod in the work of racial justice awareness, learning, and advocacy. One of their goals is to create safe space for conversations about race, in our Synod, Ministry Areas and congregations. They would like to provide a point of contact for those who could use some support, advocacy, and/or a listening circle for those who have had painful experiences related to issues of race and privilege.

I wish these colleagues well in their work. Some of the conversations they hope to encourage will be difficult. The intent, however, is not to shame or belittle, but to challenge and motivate. The hope is that our synod, in all its expressions, would become more inspired and better equipped to experience and express anew the liberating power of God's grace to grow and bless human community beyond the lines of kinship, race, ethnicity and class by which we have typically defined ourselves.

I believe that most of us long to be a part of a church whose corporate complexion more closely resembles the reign of God in all of its rich fullness and diversity. I know that I

do. But I also know that we have some very challenging and difficult work to do before that vision can become a reality. I know that I need to change and that we need to change. Can we do it? Absolutely! Will we do it? That, of course, remains to be seen.

In the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry, Jesus describes the reign of God in the broadest and most inclusive of terms. He calls us to leave our comfortable chairs and to sit in the chair that makes us uncomfortable; to invite those we see as different to sit in the places that have previously been denied to them. I am calling our synod to be open to those invitations; to risk the uncomfortable chair; to risk considering how we might move beyond the safety of our comfortable definitions of who should sit where and when, our often unexamined definitions of who is in and who is out. I am calling our synod to accept the invitation to follow the call of Christ's presence to whomever and wherever that call might take us. In doing so, I trust the Gospel promise that we will find unforeseen and rich blessings, and as Jesus promises, a new and abundant life.

Amen.